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Book Reviews

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Review of *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* by Kate Crehan (Duke University Press)

Robert Carley

ABSTRACT Gramsci's *Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*. By Kate Crehan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 222 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978 0 8223 6239 5. US List: \$23.95. Over a decade prior to the publication of *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Kate Crehan published *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*¹. This book provided a clearly [...]

Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives. By Kate Crehan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 222 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978 0 8223 6239 5. US List: \$23.95.

Over a decade prior to the publication of *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Kate Crehan published *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*¹. This book provided a clearly worded and thorough analysis of Gramsci's thought in relationship to much of his pre-prison journalism focused, expressly, on Gramsci's writing about folk culture, socialist interventions into "national popular" culture, but, more generally, on Gramsci's understanding of culture in the framework of power: ideology, hegemony, and the role of traditional intellectuals at the national level. This book was both accessible and sufficiently complex for a theoretically minded audience; it introduced Gramsci to its audiences and at the same time it managed to provide a holistic approach to Gramsci's thought, connecting political, societal, and cultural categories from Gramsci's work to anthropology and other fields where culture is central to theory and analysis. In *Gramsci's Common Sense*, Kate Crehan offers us another excellent book, this time focused expressly on three important and often not well or fully understood concepts in Gramsci's work: "subalterns," "intellectuals," and "common sense." In her characteristically clear and accessible prose, Crehan weaves an explanatory tapestry containing several threads in each of the four initial chapters focused on the concepts mentioned here. The first thread is a discussion and explanation of the difficulties in reading Gramsci and understanding the genesis of his thought as it pertains specifically to each of these concepts; the second thread is a critical review of the limitations and errors that inhere in the work of important thinkers and entire fields of study as they interpret Gramsci; the third thread is the excellent intellectual historiography and philological analysis that owes no small debt to recent Gramsci scholarship and, also, the enormous works of translation conducted principally by Joseph Buttigieg. Crehan succeeds in producing a smooth and seamless discussion of some of Gramsci's most popular, important, and, also, misinterpreted concepts poised each for use in analysis and interpretation.

The goal of these first four chapters is neither merely to clarify Gramsci's thought nor to "set the record straight," so to say. Rather, Crehan enlists these three concepts

(subalterns, intellectuals, and common sense) to help us understand contemporary inequality and the response to it on the part of mass movements—social movements that have emerged since the global economic and financial crisis of 2008. Crehan focuses specifically on the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements as case studies set against and analyzed through the theoretical framework that she builds in the first half of the book. One of the strengths of *Gramsci's Common Sense* is that it demonstrates Gramsci's contemporary relevance by revealing the complexity of the analysis of class-based inequality and its political expressions of how inequality is lived, understood, and experienced—socially, culturally, and in the framework of “everyday life.”

In the latter part of the first half of the book, careful readers, those well acquainted with Gramsci, and theorists may detect intimations of a synthesis between the book's three central concepts. In the final chapter, “Reading Gramsci in the Twenty-First Century,” Crehan draws together the categories that are discussed in the first half of the book to, as she states in the concluding paragraph, successfully chart, “the relationship between the condition of subalternity and the knowledge born of subaltern experience first as incoherent and contradictory common sense, but then elaborated and rendered coherent by the organic intellectuals who emerge out of that subaltern experience” (198). Based on her discussion of the concept of subalternity in the first and fourth chapters, the rich examples from her case studies, and in the interest of drawing her project together, Crehan drives home the larger point that

Such knowledge—always organically linked to the structural realities of class—is a central element in the reproduction or transformation of any regime of power. Despite being written in the mid-twentieth century, Gramsci's complicated and anything but economistic account of class can provide a helpful guide, although never a simple template, for those trying to imagine the possibilities for radical change in our grossly unequal, twenty-first-century world (198).

Now, this quotation captures the “takeaway” of the book for those engaged with and trying to understand the direction, intensity, and organization of contemporary struggles and movements. The book succeeds, in no small part, because Crehan never drops the thread of class analysis which is central to Gramsci's work despite the fact that for so many (though not all) who have interpreted Gramsci in “post” frameworks, avoiding Gramsci's politics and his Marxism (or dismissing it as orthodox or vulgar—choose your preferred term) seemed a central criterion for postmodern, post-structural, and even post-Marxist approaches.

One question that came up, for me was why Crehan had not engaged, in the case studies, with Gramsci's organizational efforts that developed, slowly and steadily, in 1916 in Turin, Italy after he left his studies. I am, however, convinced after completing the book that her approach to “sense making” on the part of both adherents and members of the Tea Party and participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement given both the hegemonic forces that they contended with, and how they continue to contend with them, on the one hand, and the enormous, cumbersome, and exhaustively detailed historical work (largely a product, in the English language, of biographical and historical analyses beginning in the late 1960s and continuing up to Darrow Schecter's *Gramsci and the Theory of Industrial Democracy*²) on the other, that Crehan made the right choice to allow these texts to speak for themselves; to remain suggestive of organizational concerns, strategies, and programs. Methodologically, too, there may be limited value in an historical comparative analysis of the organization of ward and factory councils to the organizational framework and capacity of the Occupy movement to think about activism, goals, and politics. After all, as Crehan notes in the last sentence of the book, Gramsci's contributions are largely to

set those combating inequality on the path of understanding hegemony less as a metaphysical event and more as a philosophical fact.

My hope, however, is that *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, will enable cultural studies scholars, in particular, to consider new ways to think beyond the paradigm for the interrelation of class and culture offered by Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson. Crehan's careful analysis and demonstration of the role of class analysis in Gramsci's work will, I believe, allow scholars who come from the Birmingham school tradition and, also, from out of Stuart Hall's rich and important contribution to the analysis of the intersections of race, class, and culture, to find new points of contact that may have been lost or not fully grown to fruition given the cultural politics of the Left in Britain at the time. It is because Crehan's book is *that* good: *that* prescient, *that* well written, and *that* strong of an interpretation of Gramsci's relevance for our times that it should be read across disciplines, by activists, politically engaged artists, filmmakers, and any cultural worker, critic, or analyst who finds themselves feeling cut off from the world at this point in our current conjuncture. And, not to end on a diminutive note, but it is short, under 200 pages, and eminently accessible to undergraduates.

Notes

1. Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). [↗](#)
2. Darrow Schecter, *Gramsci and the Theory of Industrial Democracy* (Brookfield, VT: Gowver, 1991). [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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Robert F. Carley is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station. He serves on the editorial board of *Sociological Focus: Journal of the North Central Sociological Association*, the steering committee of The Union for Democratic Communications, and, as Book Review Editor, is a member of the Editorial Collective of *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. He has recently completed a book manuscript tentatively titled, *Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and The Politics of Interpretation*. In the last year he published his first book, *Collectivities: Politics at the Intersections of Disciplines* (2016) and received The North Central Sociological Association's 2017 Scholarly Achievement Award for his article "Ideological Contention: Antonio Gramsci and the Connection between Race and Social Movement Mobilization in Early 20th Century Italy" (2016). Most recently, he is contributing a chapter to *The International Handbook of Critical Pedagogy* entitled "Gramscian Critical Pedagogy: A Holistic Approach" (Sage 2018, forthcoming).



